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This was the fifth prison break in six months . . .

STAKEOUT

by JACK RITCHIE



At eight-thirty that evening, the phone rang.

I lowered my newspaper. "If that's the sheriff, tell him I'm not home. You don't know where I could possibly be."

My wife, Norma, regarded me with those narrow green eyes. "How could I lie like that? You're here." She picked up the phone, listened, and then smiled. "He's here."

I sighed as I accepted the receiver. "Yes?"

STAKEOUT

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"There's work tonight," Sheriff Hollister said briskly. "I just got word there's been another break at the state prison."

I reflected wearily that we seemed to have a rather leaky prison. This was the fifth break in six months.

Hollister continued. "Somebody by the name of Buck O'Brien. He's dangerous, he's armed—and he's a murderer."

"Sheriff," I said, "I've been thinking about the technicalities of this thing. I don't believe it's legal to deputize me over the phone."

"Now, Franklin," he soothed. "If it'll make you feel any better, I'll deputize you in person when you get here to pick up your badge."

"Why is it always me? Aren't there any other people in this town?"

"Franklin, you know as well as I do that this is a bedroom community. Everybody works in the city and leaves at six-thirty in the morning. Could you really expect me to deputize doctors and lawyers and important people like that and have them show up late and tired for work? No, I've got to rely on the native local citizenry. The ones who were born and stuck here and work in our town. The ones I can trust. The ones who know the country backroads."

When I hung up, my wife handed me the black lunch bucket. Inside, I would find a thermos of coffee, two liver-sausage sandwiches, an apple, and possibly a Twinkie.

I put the bucket and my twelve-gauge shotgun into the car and drove the three blocks to the sheriff's office on the corner of First and Main. The other three corners were occupied by our bank, Oliver's Service Station, and the post office. I am the postmaster and the town's sole Federal employee.

As I expected, I found Oliver in the sheriff's office too, his deputy's badge pinned slightly askew on his oversized jacket. And, of course, Vernon Murphy, who runs the hardware store.

The four of us, including Sheriff Hollister, had gone to grade school together when we still had our grade school in town. And later we had all been bused to the consolidated high school in Maple River. Hollister and Vernon had been on the football team. Oliver and I had not.

Hollister was in quite good spirits, as he always seemed to be on occasions like this. He showed us some pictures. "Buck O'Brien is five foot ten, thirty-two years old, medium build, and has black hair. He broke out this afternoon, so there's a good chance he's still somewhere in the vicinity. The state cops have got roadblocks on all the main and

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secondary roads and they're depending on us to help where we can. Franklin, you and Oliver take the Tamarack Road and set up your roadblock just past the swamp. Vernon and I will take care of the Harrison Ridge trunk."

Oliver was clearly as unhappy as I. "Nobody ever uses the Tamarack Road any more."

Hollister nearly agreed. "But we can't afford to overlook anything, Oliver."

Oliver still protested. "Why do we always get the Tamarack Road? The mosquitoes out there are murder this time of year. If they're as bad as the last time, I've got a good mind to quit this whole business and go right back home."

Hollister smiled pacifyingly. "Well, now, we can't have you doing that, Oliver." He thought it over. "All right, you and Franklin take Harrison Ridge. Vernon and I will cover Tamarack."

Oliver and I got into my car and drove out to the Harrison Ridge Road. At the top of Munson's Hill, I pulled off to the side of the road and parked under a tree. There was a full moon, the night was still, and we had a clear view of the road down ahead for half a mile. The countryside was mostly scrub pine and infertile sandy land. The nearest farmhouse was more than a mile behind us.

Oliver yawned. "Here it is nine o'clock at night and you park your car under a tree. Afraid the moonlight will fade the color?"

"Just habit, I guess. People park under trees whenever they get the chance. Day or night."

I turned on the car radio and found some country music, the lesser of other evils. I kept the volume low.

Oliver was resigned. "It's going to be like all the other times. We're going to sit here and nobody will come along. We'll get stiff and chilled and our stomachs will get acidic and we'll stagger through our day's work tomorrow."

"Maybe our luck will change."

We were silent for a while and then Oliver said, "On the other hand, maybe I don't particularly want our luck to change. I mean just suppose we did run into this O'Brien? What would we do?"

"Take him into custody."

"But suppose he doesn't want to be taken into custody? And O'Brien

is dangerous—a murderer, and armed. Suppose he decided not to be captured?”

I gave the matter some thought and realized that I had always been rather relieved when our stakeouts had passed without a challenge. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, Oliver.”

The time passed slowly, as usual. We ate our sandwiches, not because we were hungry, but because it was something to do. My lunch bucket contained no Twinkie.

It was about one in the morning and Oliver was dozing when I saw something moving far down the moonlit road. I nudged Oliver awake.

He blinked. “What?”

“Down the road. There’s somebody heading our way. On foot.”

Oliver peered and affirmed. “I see him now. I wonder who it could be? Probably somebody out shining deer.” He kept watching the approaching figure. “Do we have the authority to arrest him for shining? Or are we just an *ad hoc* posse after O’Brien?”

“He’s not using a flashlight,” I said. “If he’s got one.”

We let the dark figure approach to within perhaps a hundred yards before I spoke. “Well, let’s get out and do our job and find out who he is.” My mouth felt dry. “You’re probably right, though. Just somebody out for deer.”

Oliver got out of one side of the car and I the other. We left the darkness of the tree and stepped into the middle of the road, our shotguns in our hands.

The figure ahead saw us and stopped.

I could see now that he was carrying a long-barreled weapon of some kind.

It moved swiftly to his shoulder and there came one flash and then another. We heard the sounds of the shots and the whistle of bullets.

Oliver and I reacted instinctively. We both fired.

The man ahead grunted, staggered to the shoulder of the road, and fell.

Oliver and I endured fifteen seconds of shocked silence, then we moved forward cautiously. When we reached the fallen man, I switched on my flashlight.

The man was dead, a rifle still clutched in one hand. He appeared to be of medium height and build, was in his thirties, and had black hair.

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Oliver cleared his throat. "It's O'Brien."

We examined the corpse more carefully. The man wore what appeared to be fatigues of a twill material and there was a number stenciled over his left breast pocket. A plain billed cap lay beside him.

"What do we do now?" Oliver asked. "Take the body into town?"

"Don't touch a thing, Oliver," I said. "I'll go get the sheriff and you stay here and guard the body."

"I'm not staying here alone with no body," Oliver said firmly.

I, in turn, had no such intention either. I spoke for both of us. "This body isn't going anywhere. And nobody's going to steal it. Why can't we just leave it where it is and both of us go looking for the sheriff? I mean, it's on the shoulder of the road, so there's no danger some car will come along and run over it."

Oliver quickly agreed and we returned to our car. We would have to go through town to reach the Tamarack Road.

At First and Main, Oliver touched my arm. "Hold it. The sheriff's car is parked behind his office. I guess he came back to town."

We parked and went to the door of the building. It proved to be locked. There was a night light, but the office appeared to be empty.

"Nobody there," Oliver said. "And Hollister never walks home. He always takes the patrol car with him."

We mulled over the dilemma and then I said, "I don't think we should just stand here and wait. No telling where he is or when he's coming back. We'd better get to a phone and call the State Police."

Oliver's home was just behind his service station. We jaywalked across the road, in no danger of being run over by the traffic, the next of which would likely be Wally Schroeder's milk tanker coming through town at 4:30 A.M.

We turned up the walk of Oliver's house.

He frowned. "I see a light behind the drapes of our bedroom window. I wonder why Elizabeth's up. She's not sick, I hope."

We were about to pass the ground-floor window when Oliver stopped cold. I did too and we stared through the slit of light coming from the point where the drapes had failed to meet.

We had found the sheriff. Also Oliver's wife, Elizabeth. They were both hale and well and in the pink. Quite.

Oliver stood petrified, his mouth open.

I took him by the arm and gently led him away. We walked back to our car and got inside. I sat there, wondering what was to be done next.

How did one handle a situation like this? Rush in and confront them? Oliver was still mute and stunned, incapable of any action, if action were indeed called for.

I sighed. Poor Oliver. Suppose something like that had happened to me? Suppose Norma—

Two thoughts collided in my mind. First, how did it happen that Norma had that lunch bucket so ready and packed, including the fresh hot coffee? She had handed the bucket to me the moment I put down the phone.

And second, where the hell was Vernon Murphy? Out there on the Tamarack road maintaining a road block alone?

I turned the ignition key and drove toward my house. I parked a hundred yards short, leaving the catatonic Oliver seated where he was, and walked the rest of the way.

The windows of my house were dark. All of them. Norma must certainly be asleep.

I tried the front doorknob. The door was unlocked. Usually Norma insists upon locking the doors when she expects to be home alone.

I slipped inside and tiptoed through the darkness up the stairs to our bedroom door. No light edged from underneath it. I felt a sense of relief—and a wave of guilt over my suspicions—and was about to leave as I had come when I heard the voices.

I leaned toward the door and listened.

I would recognize Vernon's voice anywhere. And certainly my wife's. And I did.

I straightened. Enraged, of course, but also with a feeling of helplessness. Again I asked myself, what does one do in a situation like this? Rush in and confront the two of them? And what would be the result of that? Fisticuffs? I was not at all optimistic about the results. Vernon outweighed me by at least thirty pounds.

But was that what really stopped me from breaking into the bedroom? No. It was embarrassment. The embarrassment of having an unfaithful wife, the embarrassment of having the world learn about her infidelity, and the final, crushing embarrassment of suddenly realizing that—

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My face flushed fiercely. Oliver and I had been sent out to establish roadblocks on at least a dozen occasions during the past six months. Had the fleeing prisoners and various other criminals whom we had been assigned to intercept ever existed at all?

Certainly O'Brien had been corporeal enough, but what about the others? Now that I remembered, Hollister had never had any pictures to show us before. He had just given us vague descriptions. O'Brien had been the sole exception.

Yes, Oliver and I had faithfully and doltishly spent long mosquito-bitten nights on isolated roads while back in town the sheriff and Vernon Murphy—

I returned to the car, utterly stunned. Oliver still sat on the passenger side, perhaps not even aware I had been away.

What now? I found myself driving and eventually back on the Harrison Ridge Road. I returned to the spot where O'Brien had died and parked under the tree again. Oliver and I stared out at the night, each suffering his own thoughts.

Dawn was slow in coming, but when it arrived so did the sheriff's patrol car.

Hollister sat at the wheel, Vernon beside him. They both looked a bit worn but content.

"Well, Franklin," Hollister said, "I guess we can call it a night. Looks like another dry run."

"No," I said. "Not a dry run. Not this time." I pointed ahead to the weedy grass on the shoulder of the road where O'Brien's body lay.

Hollister saw it. He and Vernon got out of their car and investigated. I followed, with Oliver, perhaps a bit recovered, behind me.

Hollister touched the body with the toe of his boot. "Well, I'll be damned. The two of you weren't out here for nothing after all." He glanced covertly at Vernon and they shared a secret chuckle.

Color swept into Oliver's face and he was definitely alive again. And he moved.

He wrenched the rifle out of O'Brien's dead hand, pointed it at the sheriff, and fired.

Hollister dropped to the road, astonishment on his face, and then quite dead.

"Now, now, Oliver," I said, but he had started a trend. I found myself removing the rifle from his hands and bolting another cartridge

into the chamber. I pointed the weapon at Vernon Murphy and fired.

He fell beside the sheriff, also unquestionably dead.

Oliver looked puzzled. "Why did you shoot Vernon?"

"I had to."

"Oh?" said Oliver, suddenly understanding. "You too?"

I used my handkerchief to wipe our fingerprints from O'Brien's rifle. Then I returned it to O'Brien's hands, making certain there would be an abundance of his fingerprints on the weapon.

"This is the way it happened, Oliver," I said. "Hollister and Vernon came up to relieve us, and at that moment O'Brien chose to come down the road. There was shooting. The sheriff and Vernon were killed by O'Brien, and we in turn shot down the fugitive."

Oliver looked down at the bodies, rather satisfied. "Yes, that's the way it happened." He looked thoughtful. "But somehow it still seems incomplete. Our wives, I mean. Should we go back home and—?"

"Not now, Oliver. That would be too much for one day. We'll wait about six months and then we'll take care of one of them. And six months later the other. I think we'll want to get away with it, so we must be clever, and we must also provide each other with alibis. If they're needed."

Oliver smiled eagerly. "Which one goes first?"

We tossed a coin.

Norma. Around Christmas would be nice, I thought.

We drove off in search of a phone to call the State Police.

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